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Linking an Asian Transregional Commerce in Tea: Overseas Chinese Merchants in the Fujian-Singapore Trade, 1920–1960

JASON LIM

Leiden: Brill NV, 2010, 252 p.

This book is a product of Jason Lim's research into Chinese newspapers in Singapore from 1880 to 1930, where he first learned of Anxi migrants' involvement in the tea trade between Fujian and

Singapore. Anxi had been a crucial tea-growing region in southern Fujian, a province in southeast China, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the 1920s, social unrest led to an exodus of people from Anxi county into Singapore. In the early twentieth century, Fujian's tea market shrank as a result of the trade competition in tea from Ceylon, India, Japan, and Taiwan. The market in Singapore between 1920 to 1960 played a compensatory role. Lim focuses his research on the relation between politics and the tea trade between Fujian and Singapore by devoting two chapters respectively to the periods 1932–47 and 1945–60, and three background chapters to either Fijian's tea production or the links between Singapore and Fujian.

Between 1920 and 1960, changes in the political regimes in both Fujian and Singapore had a subsequent effect on the location and types of archives Lim used. On the Fujian side, the ruling government was that of the Republic of China (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) respectively before and after 1949. The ROC moved archives from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949 while the PRC stored their archives in Fujian after 1949. Singapore, a British colony since 1819, was occupied by Japan in 1942–45, and turned from a British colony to a part of Malaya from 1945 before becoming independent in 1959 and breaking away from Malaysia in 1965. Through the use of archival and other related materials obtained from Singapore, Fujian, and Taiwan, as well as those collected in United Kingdom and Australia, Lim describes the Singapore-Fujian tea trade history in this book (which is a revised version of his doctoral dissertation). His clear and detailed account vividly reveals the interactions between the overseas Chinese cultural network and international politics.

The large influx of Anxi people into Singapore in the 1920s enabled these migrants to replace the Chaozhou group which had previously dominated Singapore's tea trade (pp. 28, 75). From 1920 to 1960, the tea merchants' association was formed and controlled by the Anxi group with some particular dialect (p. 95). Even though these migrants had left Anxi, they maintained connections to affiliates or lands in their native province thereby establishing a system to bring Anxi tea or other Fujian tea into Singapore. They represented the tea merchants in Singapore and sometimes coordinated with other tea merchants association in Southeast Asia to strengthen contacts with the Fujian provincial government for the purpose of improving the tea trade relating to quality control, exchange rate, and taxes (p. 97).

As the ROC's nationality law was based on blood (*jus sanguinis*), these Singapore-based Chinese still claimed themselves as Chinese before the 1960s. They kept asserting that Taiwan's tea was inferior to Fujianese tea because customers were used to the taste of the tea from their own native province. Tea from Taiwan, then a colony of Japan, was deemed an "enemy product" (p. 121). When Japan controlled Singapore and the coastal area of China, Anxi tea was still brought into Singapore, sometimes through Hong Kong (p. 139). Even though the Anxi people were in Singapore, they strongly continued to identify themselves with the motherland. They contributed money and directly participated in the war to help the ROC government resist Japan. They often

donated money for social welfare other than remittances to their own respective families. Thus, selling tea from Fujian became a form of patriotism aimed at promoting “national products” (p. 122). However, the Anxi migrants increasingly purchased tea from Taiwan by deeming it to be “essentially Chinese” (p. 172) after their estates on the Chinese mainland were nationalized by the PRC government and the ROC government moved to Taiwan maintained a private ownership system which was supported more by overseas Chinese.

In 1928, China was unified by the Nationalist Army and further attempts to improve tea quality were introduced. China was unsuccessful in adopting those plantation systems that were introduced in Ceylon and India. Instead, China set up experiment stations to test new tea plants within small land plots. As China was continually under threat of war between 1920 and 1949, revenues did not suffice for large-scale improvement. In particular, when the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War between the communists and nationalists broke out, unfavorable exchange rates were levied against patriotic Anxi Singaporeans. While Singapore was occupied by Japan, some tea merchants purchased more tea from Taiwan (p. 98). Nevertheless, when the Communist government took over their home properties, these Chinese emigrants based in Singapore still tried to import tea from the homeland. However, Communist China more and more sold tea through a national company to countries within the Soviet bloc (p. 162). In the Republican period before 1949, Fujian tea was categorized and differentiated into tea for the domestic market, tea for the foreign market, and tea for “the overseas Chinese” market (pp. 131–133). In the 1960s, Anxi Singaporeans took citizenship in the newly independent Singapore and no longer laid claim to their former nationality (pp. 183–186).

There are a number of problems with this book. For example, the distinction between *baozhong* tea and *wulong* tea has been blurred (p. 75). *Wulong* tea is actually fermented more than *baozhong* tea. Furthermore, the book does not elaborate on some other aspects relating to overseas Chinese cultural networks and international politics.

Firstly, with regard to cultural networks, Lim points out that Anxi people only constituted 3 percent of Singapore’s population, of which 75 percent was Chinese. Of these Chinese, Fujianese emigrants accounted for more than half (pp. 26, 189). Lim mentioned that in the 1930s, tea from Ceylon, India, Japan, and Taiwan competed with tea from Anxi in Singaporean shops (p. 114). Western firms were also importing other teas (p. 116). Lim did not describe the competition between Anxi tea and other teas for non-Anxi or non-Fujian consumers in Singapore. Lim mentions that Taiwan also had Anxi migrants (p. 27). In fact, these Anxi migrants were crucial for Taiwan’s tea business, but Lim does not delve into the question of whether this group helped facilitate the tea trade between Taiwan and Singapore.

Secondly, in regards to international politics, Lim does not discuss in detail the interaction between the ruling Singaporean government and the Chinese government, nor does he compare it with other Southeast Asian governments in connection with the tea trade. The Japanese govern-

ment was active in soliciting the cooperation of the overseas Chinese in Java in the 1910s to persuade the Dutch government to continue purchasing tea from Taiwan, tea that was, in effect, a kind of Japanese tea (Lin 2001). Lin mentions that the Singaporean government kept surveillance over the overseas Chinese anti-Japanese boycott movement in the 1930s and the share of Taiwan tea in Singapore increased from 1925 to 1933 (pp. 114, 118). The governmental policy on the Singapore side needs more elaboration.

Notwithstanding the above issues, on the whole, this book helps us understand more about migration and identity, war and trade, the overseas Chinese, and intra-Asian trade.

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